

Editorial

A need for Species Recovery Plans

The Wildlife (Protection) Act was enacted in 1972, and since then has been modified several times, the latest being in 2003. This Act is supposed to take care of all our protected areas, wild places and wild species. The Act also covers The Wildlife (Transactions and Taxidermy) Rules, 1973; The Wildlife (Stock Declaration) Central Rules, 1973; The Wildlife (Protection) Licensing (Additional Matters for Consideration) Rules, 1983; The Wildlife (Protection) Rules, 1995; The Wildlife (Specified Plants – Conditions for Possession by Licensee) Rules, 1995; The National Zoo Policy, 1998; and The Declaration of Wildlife Stock Rules, 2003.

The 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976 was a landmark decision when for the first time the subject of wildlife was inserted as Entry-17B in the List-III (concurrent list) of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution. With rapid changes in the perception of wildlife conservation in the world, the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 has been appropriately amended in 1982, 1991, 1993 and 2003.

The wild species of flora and fauna are listed in various schedules (I to V), with the most threatened species listed in Schedule I. But, is it so? If you go through the species lists, the Act is heavily biased towards mega-vertebrates – some of the rare amphibians, reptiles, fish, and insects are left out. The listing is unfortunately not based on any objective scientific assessment of threats to a particular species.

Our suggestion to the Government of India is that this listing of species in different schedules should be done purely on the basis of scientific assessment, and for species that are listed in Schedule I and Schedule II, there should be species recovery plans. It is no use just listing the species, and then forgetting about them. Our aims should be to see that species recover to such numbers that they are downlisted from Schedule I to Schedule II, and from Schedule II to III or IV. That will be some achievement. We have some examples of success stories. For instance, Blackbuck (*Antelope cervicapra*) has recovered in many areas and it is not so rare as it used to be 30 years ago. Moreover, like most ungulates, it has tremendous breeding potential. Should it not be downlisted to Schedule II? Even in Schedule II, it will remain legally protected. Similarly, Chinkara (*Gazella bennettii*) is widespread in north and central India, and is abundant in many Bishnoi areas of Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana. It is found in at least 11 states and more than 150 sanctuaries. There could be as many as a hundred thousand Chinkara in Rajasthan alone. With such a large population, should it be included in Schedule I at all? Are we not diluting Schedule I by including such common and widespread species? Interestingly, Ermine (*Mustela erminea*), a widespread species in the temperate regions of the world, is included in Schedule I. Or take the case of Leopard (*Panthera pardus*), it is the most widespread of large cats in the world (present in Africa, the Middle East and Asia). Undoubtedly many subspecies or populations of Leopard are critically endangered and need every possible conservation support to survive. They are under great poaching pressures, but can we say that the species is threatened with extinction? Can we equate it with the Hangul (*Cervus elaphus hanglu*) or the Pygmy Hog (*Sus salvanus*) or the Asiatic Lion (*Panthera leo persica*) that have only one known viable population each?

It should be compulsory for the Central and State governments to start species recovery plans for all the species listed in Schedule I. These species recovery plans should be based on good science and should have a time frame, say 10-15 years (most endangered species would take that long, perhaps longer, to recover at the current level of disturbances). Some thinly distributed species that need a wider landscape to survive may never recover so they would need targeted conservation actions. The classical examples are the Great Indian Bustard (*Ardeotis nigriceps*) and Lesser Florican (*Sypheotides indica*) that need grasslands, or the Gangetic Dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*) that requires clean, unpolluted and undisturbed rivers. For such species there should be special central government schemes, much like Project Tiger and Project Elephant.

We also have to develop a different approach for the conservation of our floral diversity. The IUCN criteria and categories valid for fauna are not very suitable for plants. Similarly, for commercial fish and marine species, we need not include all of them in various schedules of the Wildlife Protection Act but devise a sustainable approach for conservation. Perhaps local communities, in this case fishermen, have to be empowered to conserve their biotic resource. What I want to emphasize is that there is no single solution for saving species, and certainly

including threatened and not so threatened species in Schedule I or Schedule II is not the answer to emerging conservation needs and initiatives. Listing in various schedules should be dynamic as it requires regular reassessment.

I also feel that an attempt must be made to make the plants and animals mentioned in the schedules easily identifiable. It serves no purpose unless the animal and plant mentioned in the schedule has a sketch or photograph of the animal or plant along with the name(s). It is therefore necessary to publish an identification catalogue wherever possible, so that anyone, including the enforcement authorities such as the Forest Department, Police, Customs and Coast Guards, can readily identify the species mentioned in the Act.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) should start an exercise to recheck various species listed in schedules, by involving experts and wildlife research institutes. Let all those species about which we do not have sufficient population data, which are suspected to be rare or declining, be in higher schedules on the basis of the precautionary principle, but those species which are not so uncommon, should be down listed (but should remain protected). The IUCN method of assessment of a species status is very simple and scientific. Let us follow this method and reassess all the species listed in various schedules of the WPA, and if we find that there is a need to change the status of a species, we should not hesitate to do so. Once this exercise is over, for all the species that are finally listed in Schedule I, there should be centrally funded, science based species recovery plans, involving the cooperation of conservation institutes, local communities, experts and government departments.

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